

Statement of Rep. Nydia M. Velázquez
for the
Briefing on FBI Activity in Puerto Rico
March 28, 2006

Thank you, Ranking Member Conyers and Representative Rangel, for organizing this important briefing today – despite reluctance from Chairman Sensenbrenner to hold an official hearing on the FBI's recent actions in Puerto Rico. As one of the three Puerto Rican Members of Congress, I am personally invested in what takes place in Puerto Rico and appreciate the opportunity to be here today to hear more about the events that led up to the death of Filiberto Ojeda Rios and the treatment of reporters by the FBI.

From Venezuela to Bolivia to Argentina, we have seen this Administration's lack of sensitivity. Instead of solidifying our ties with Latin America, we're pushing them away by treating them with the arrogance of past failed policies and conduct. The doctrine of the big stick didn't work then and it will not work now.

And now we see this behavior in Puerto Rico with the death of Filiberto Ojeda Rios and the unacceptable treatment of reporters by the FBI.

As we all know, the FBI has a history with the people of Puerto Rico that can be described as volatile, at best. Internal FBI documents attest to the Bureau's interference in and persecution of advocacy efforts for the independence of Puerto Rico – a clear violation of the right of its people to self-determination.

Since the FBI first came to Puerto Rico 50 years ago, we have seen decade after decade of interference in the lives of Puerto Ricans seeking to express their Constitutionally protected rights. The event involving the death of Mr. Ojeda took place on September 23rd – the day Puerto Ricans observe Grito de Lares in recognition of Spanish colonialism and oppression. I find it suspect – at the least – that of *all* days, the FBI took action against Mr. Ojeda on this important day in Puerto Rican history.

Mr. Ojeda's death in September, and the excessive use of force against reporters in February, demonstrate not only the lack of respect for the Puerto Rican government and the press, but also the need for a full investigation into the events that led up to both of these incidences. The FBI has claimed that their actions were predicated on information about a, quote, "domestic terrorist attack". I ask the FBI this then -- why was the Governor of Puerto Rico left in the dark about the supposed terrorist activity when the mayor of New York City is made aware of threats in the city he governs? Doesn't the government of Puerto Rico deserve the same respect?

And as for the treatment of journalists – is pepper-spraying, kicking and pushing people how the FBI demonstrates its respect for freedom of the press? Is this how we will promote democracy in Iraq? Credibility is the issue with this Administration.

In September, and again in February, I joined my colleagues in calling on FBI Director Mueller to investigate the death of Mr. Ojeda and the use of excessive force against reporters. Just last week, Puerto Rico's Justice Department filed suit against US federal authorities, including FBI Director Mueller and Attorney General Gonzalez. This suit calls for the release of the names of agents who used pepper spray on journalists. Though the reports and the suit are still pending, we join together today in the hopes of shedding light on these two inexcusable events and, more importantly, ensuring that similar injustices do not occur in the future.

Though I wish we were holding this forum as an official hearing in order to demonstrate to you all the commitment of Congress to protect the rights of the people of Puerto Rico, our Republican leadership does not recognize the importance of this support. I assure you, however, that there are those of us in Congress who are outraged by the FBI's actions – and we stand firm in ensuring that they are held accountable.

Thank you all for taking the time to come here to share your stories with us. I look forward to your testimony.